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TAGS: PGOV ASEC PREL IV

SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE: GBAGBO PROMISES TO INTEGRATE EX-MILITIA SOLDIERS INTO SECURITY FORCES

REF: 06 ABIDJAN 333

Classified By: Pol/Econ Jim Wojtasiewicz, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) In a controversial but not entirely unexpected move, President Gbagbo announced February 13 that the 4000 "New Recruits" would be hired into the military. This move came after on February 1-2, New Recruits fired automatic weapons in the air in several towns in government-held territory to protest their status.

¶2. (C) The New Recruits are a group of irregular military who were recruited from the pro-Gbagbo militias to fight against the 2002 rebellion. Because they did not go through the normal recruitment process, but rather were selected by Young Patriots leader Charles Ble Goude and presidential advisor (and shadow defense minister) Bertin Kadet, the military hierarchy refused to swear them in or to regularize their military status. Up until last March, they received no regular salary, health insurance or other military benefits, but only "war bonuses" that the government had fallen far behind on paying. It was agreed under the 2003 Linas Marcoussis Agreement that this group would not be brought into the military but would be disbanded. After a protest last March, they won the right to receive regular salaries instead of war bonuses, eligibility for health insurance, and a promise that they would be given priority in applying for normal recruitment into the security forces.

¶3. (C) According to local press reports, the New Recruits were not happy about the end of their war bonus payments at the end of last December (even though they agreed last March to receive regular salaries instead of the war bonuses) and they were also reportedly still dissatisfied at being required to pass through the normal recruitment process one by one in order to be integrated into the security forces. Indeed, the war bonuses ranged from the equivalent of \$180 to \$360, depending on how close the soldier had been to the front lines. The regular salary they started receiving last March, on the other hand, was only the equivalent of \$200. Under the terms of the March agreement they continued until December to retroactively receive the war bonuses the government had fallen behind on paying, plus the new \$200 monthly salary. Thus, in January they saw a big drop in their pay when the war bonuses disappeared. February 1-2 their anger boiled over and they began firing their weapons into the air in protest. In response, Gbagbo promised to fully integrate them into the security forces.

¶4. (C) Comment. This move is sure to rile the rebel New Forces and the opposition, coming as it does right in the middle of Gbagbo's proposed "direct dialogue." Gbagbo would be breaking the Linas Marcoussis Agreement and effectively augmenting the security forces on his side just as he is ostensibly trying to persuade the rebels to disarm. However, the pro-Gbagbo press is speculating that through this move Gbagbo might be preparing the political ground to make

concessions to the FN on their proposed integrated joint staff. This could be a good thing. The refusal so far by the government side to discuss at all any form of integration of the two armies is a serious logistical obstacle to disarmament, and another violation of the Linas Marcoussis Agreement. The FN were not defeated in 2002 and it is unrealistic to expect them almost five years later to simply surrender and/or disappear. Ultimately, it remains to be seen whether Gbagbo will really follow through on this latest promise. He could also be only buying a little time with the New Recruits while using their status as a bargaining chip in this latest "direct dialogue" with the FN. End Comment.

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